

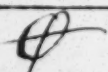
*The Use and Extent of Reason in
Matters of Religion.*

A
S E R M O N

Preached before the
UNIVERSITY of OXFORD,
At St. MART's,
On Tuesday in WHITSUN-WEEK,
June 8. 1756.

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M D C C L V I.



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PHILIPP. II. 13.

*For it is God which worketh in you both
to will and to do of his good Pleasure.*

THIS is one of those *hard sayings* which has given great offence to the wise men of this World, as seeming to lessen the Prerogative of their Darling Idol, Human Reason. They persuade themselves that they have in their own breasts a Guide sufficient to lead them into all Truth. Reason is with them all powerful, able to teach them the whole of their Duty, and to enable them to practise what is right in opposition to all the force of corrupt Appetites, which are continually warring with Right Reason, and endeavouring to *bring it into Subjection to the Law of Sin*. It is a mortifying thing to a Man puffed up with a fond conceit of his own abilities, to be told that he is not *sufficient of himself to do any thing as of himself*, but that his *whole sufficiency is of God who worketh in him to will and to do of his good Pleasure*.

He therefore boldly resolves to trust to his own heart well assured that from thence he shall understand all things, shall find out by Rational Deductions, and from the Relations of Things,

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a Religion of Nature containing the whole Duty of Man; and he will not endure to think that a Rational Creature cannot judge and act what is perfectly right even of himself.

As some men extol Human Reason to an undue Height, ascribing to it Abilities which it hath not, there are others in an opposite Extreme who deny it those which it really hath. They have even gone so far as to discard it entirely as absolutely incapable of judging at all in Religious Matters. When it is said that *it is God that worketh in us to will and to do of his good Pleasure*; they urge that Man is incapable of doing any thing: If you will hearken to these Men, Reason is so degenerated and sunk in Corruption, that Man is utterly unable to distinguish Right from Wrong or Good from Evil. All Care and Attention on our parts seem not only unnecessary but impracticable: Free Agency is in a great measure destroyed, and Man is little better than a mere Machine, entirely actuated by some adventitious and supernatural Principle: And as all the workings of our Mind are attributed to the Spirit, and Common Sense is put out of the question, we are not to wonder that the grossest Absurdities, the wildest Extravagances, and in some cases even the most impious Blasphemies and immoral Conduct have been insisted on as the dictates of Gods Holy Spirit, *working in men to will and to do of his good Pleasure*.

Both these Extremes are highly prejudicial to the Interests of True Religion, and, as it usually happens,

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happens, the truth lies between them. Human Nature is by no means so good or so bad as some People would represent it: It is neither sufficient of itself to find out a perfect Rule for Moral Conduct, nor able to fulfil its Duty or to work out its Salvation of itself, after such Rule is discovered. But neither, on the other hand, is it so blind as not to be able to judge in any Case aright. It may and it must be our Guide in examining the Grounds of our Religion and applying the Doctrines of it. It is certainly God that *worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure*; but Reason must distinguish his working from the wild flights of an heated Imagination or the Conceits of an enthusiastick or disordered Fancy.

At a time when Human Reason is daringly set up in opposition to Divine Truths on the one hand, whilst an irrational method of defending the Faith hath furnished the Infidel with matter of Ridicule on the other; it can neither be improper for the Age we live in, nor unsuitable to the present Season, if from the words I have now read to you I take occasion

First, to shew that Human Reason is not sufficient to point out a perfect Rule for our Conduct in Life, or to enforce effectually a Right Course of Action when such Rule is discovered.

And *Secondly*, if I point out a few Rules whereby we may distinguish whether the Workings in us be really of God.

And *first* then I am to shew that Human Reason is not sufficient to point out to us a perfect Rule for our Conduct in life, or to enforce effectually a Right Course of Action when such Rule is discovered.

^a *He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool,* says Solomon; and Experience gives us infallible Demonstration of the Truth of this Assertion.

For whoever shall depend entirely on its Directions, for the Conduct of his Life and Actions, will find that he *trusteth on the staff of a broken reed whereon if a Man lean, it will be so far from supporting him, that it will even go into his hand and pierce it: so is Reason to all that trust solely to it.*

If applied to the Discovery of a Rule for Moral Conduct, it will be so far from guiding Men into the right Way that it will lead them astray into the Mazes of Ignorance and Errour, the uncertain speculations and intricacies of *science falsely so called*. This appears from fact. For among all the Systems of Moral Philosophy, which, at different Times or in different Countries, have been in fashion; who can point out one that is perfect, or even free from glaring Absurdity in some part or other? As one System has grown out of vogue and a different one prevailed; it has been no difficult matter for the rising Philosopher to point out the Errours of preceding Masters, tho' he has not been able to remedy the defects, or to bring to light a new Philosophy without new Errour. Even in

^a Prov. 28. 26.

the most common things, we find no certainty or consistency in human speculations. There is nothing more frequent in our Thoughts, or in our Mouths than Virtue; and yet what an almost infinite Variety of different Opinions do we see entertain'd of it by different Men? Of those who have written on the Subject scarce any two seem to have had precisely the same Idea of it, or to have plac'd it's Nature and Obligation on the same Basis. Nor is this inconsistency to be wonder'd at: For whatever is of mere Human Invention, and confirm'd by no higher Authority, must be as variable and uncertain as Human Judgment itself is; and we need only appeal to the very different lights which several Men see the same thing in, to be convinc'd that no uniform Rule is to be expected from thence. In truth, Reason consider'd in this manner will scarcely differ from Taste, or Opinion, which every single man claims as his indisputable Right: A Rule founded on it therefore can end in little better than every man's doing *what is right in his own eyes*.

This may shew us the Expediency of some infallible Guide to direct our steps in the Right Path, that may not only shew us the *Way*, the *Truth*, and the *Life*, but may prevent us too from wandering from them, which the perverseness, inattention, or idle curiosity of Man would otherwise make him extremely liable to. And such a Guide we have from the Spirit of God who hath not only assur'd us what is *God's Pleasure*, but *worketh in us to will, and to do it*.

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The warm Advocates for the Sufficiency of Reason, who carry the matter farthest, have extoll'd human Wisdom to such a Degree, as to make it little less than infallible. They want not to be taught their Duty from any other Principle but their own Hearts. A Man's own Judgment affords a sufficient Light to his Conscience: All other Assistance is unnecessary: and the Law which we contend for, as given by the Spirit of God as a standing Rule for our Conduct, is therefore rejected as needless and superfluous without even examining it's Credentials.

It will be in vain to tell these Men that Reason, however perfect it might be in it's original Purity, is now so debas'd by the many Inventions which Man hath found out as not to be able to judge aright: Or to tell them that we cannot arrive at certain and adequate knowledge in many things which are every day the Objects of our Senses; much less in matters so far remov'd from us, as the Attributes of God, and the Administrations of his Providence in the Natural or Moral Government of the World. I say it will be to no purpose to argue thus from the Weakness of Human Reason with that Man who is arrogant enough to believe himself absolutely perfect.

“ From a just and proper Exercise of our own
 “ Talents; from the Fabrick of the World, and
 “ the visible Constitution of things, we can (it is
 “ said) easily discover the Being and Attributes
 “ of God and the Nature and Condition of Man,
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"and from thence the several Duties we owe to
 "God and our Fellow Creatures are not only
 "manifestly seen, but even as demonstrable as
 "mathematical Truths."

And we may without any Prejudice to the Cause of Religion admit all this to be true: but we shall soon enquire whence this Knowledge is deriv'd.

In the mean time let it be observ'd, that tho' we should allow (what is by no means the case) that one Man wiser than the rest of the World should by Reason unassisted have gone thus far, yet that one man's Abilities cannot be fairly made the standard of all Men's. It is certain that, of the Bulk of Mankind, not one in ten thousand could understand this method of demonstrating his duty; could see or attend to the Fitness of Things and the Relations we stand in to God and each other.

A system of moral duties then, thus establish'd on Reasonings unintelligible to the Bulk of Mankind, could have little influence, and would leave the generality of Men as much in the dark with respect to their Duty, as much in need of other Assistance, as if such Deductions had never been made.

But not to insist longer upon this.

It may be perhaps difficult to ascertain how far Reason might carry even the wisest Men. Let us rest the matter then on plain Fact; and it should seem that the best way of determining with any Accuracy what is to be expected from Reason, or what it can do, is by enquiring

enquiring what it actually has done without Assistance.

If we may judge from the most valuable and justly admir'd Compositions in almost all Branches of Literature, and from the most elegant Remains in every politer Art which are to this day not only celebrated, but imitated by modern Artists; it must appear that Human Wisdom was at least in as flourishing a State before the Gospel of Christ made it's Appearance, as it has ever been since. And yet, by all this Wisdom it is certain that the World knew not God. Nothing like a pure System of Natural Religion ever prevail'd in any Country: The Worship of their Gods was so foully stain'd with Lewdness and Barbarity, Folly and Superstition; that, in the emphatical Words of the Apostle, *it is a Shame even to speak of those Things which were done of them in their secret Rites.* And tho' it be certain that a few Persons who are justly celebrated as the wisest and best Men of Antiquity entertain'd more suitable Notions of the Deity, yet it does not appear that one of them by Human Wisdom ever could extricate himself from the Idolatry and Superstition of his Country. Their Wisdom had directed them to the Knowledge of one Supreme Being, and enabled them to form many just Reflections on his Attributes and his Providential Government of the World. Yet when they thus knew him, *they glorify'd him not as God, neither were they thankful, but became vain in their Imaginations, and their foolish Heart was darkened; professing themselves*

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themselves Wise they became Fools, and chang'd the Glory of the uncorruptible God into an Image made like to corruptible Man, and to Birds, and four-footed Beasts, and creeping Things.

If this be a true Representation of the Case, and the Histories of every Age and Nation assure us that it is, how can we imagine that the World could by reason thus deprav'd have been rescu'd from that Ignorance, Superstition, and Immorality, which had universally overrun it? Or can we think that by our Wisdom we should have been able to have fram'd any true Notion of God, or to have perform'd a reasonable Service to Him? unless we imagine ourselves wiser than all Ages which have gone before us, which I believe will scarcely be pretended to by those who fondly extol the Works of some of the old Philosophers so far, as to think the Writings of an inspir'd Apostle Foolishness in Comparison of them.

How comes it then to pass that Men can now see clearly the fundamental Articles of Natural Religion, though hid from the Eyes of Men in Ages full as knowing in other Matters as our own? How come the Moral Philosophers of the present Times to have so much Advantage over the Antient ones, as to be able to reason so well (as confessedly they do) on these Subjects?

The Case is plain — Since the glorious Light of the Gospel has shone on the Moral World, the Clouds of Ignorance and Errour which prevail'd in antient Days of Darkness are dispell'd; true Notions of God and Religion are establish'd

by the Spirit of God, and these are so evidently agreeable to Right Reason that the Pride of Men has ascrib'd them solely to Human Disquisitions. Whereas, would they attend to plain Matter of Fact, they would find that Human Wisdom, so far from reforming the World from Errour, never rescued (as far as appears) one single Man of old from Idolatry.

Nor will it avail them ought in the present Case to urge farther that what Reason now does, it would, if it had been attended to, have done heretofore: That the same Train of Argument would have infallibly led to the same Conclusions then as now. For the Question need not be what Reason might have done (which can never be known with certainty) but what it really did. A general Inattention to the Voice of Reason, or a general Abuse or Misapplication of it, would as infallibly keep Men in Darkness, as any Defect in it possibly could, and would in it's Consequences have just the same Effect, as if it was ever so impotent. For to what purpose have we the most excellent Faculties if from some Corruption we are unable to use them? And it is certain that for Ages together, this Inattention, Abuse, or Misapplication, (call it what you will) prevail'd so far, that Men of the best Genius, most refin'd Thought, and greatest Penetration, were never able to make Use of their Reason in Matters of Religious Concern so effectually as to preserve themselves from the grossest Errours. What was the Cause of this general Corruption which had

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so far blinded Mankind we need not here enquire; it is enough that we know it was Fact: And if so, it must sure be granted that some Remedy was necessary to remove this general Malady and to enable Reason to exert itself. This Remedy the Gospel supplied, which freed the Human Mind from those Chains of Ignorance and Superstition which had so long kept it confin'd in the Prisons of Darknes.

This *Wisdom of God and Power of God* soon triumph'd over Idolatry, and made *Reason which was before asleep, awake and arise from the dead.* It was *Christ that gave the Light* which guided Men to that Train of Reasoning, that System of Knowledge, which has been since most preposterously set up in Opposition to the Gospel. In short, what is now call'd Natural Religion seems to be nothing more than the Doctrines of Christianity drest up in such a Manner as may give them the Air of Human Philosophy, but entirely divested of that Sanction of Authority which, at last, is the only effectual Means of enforcing the Practice of *whatsoever Things are true, whatsoever Things are honest, whatsoever Things are just, pure, lovely, or of good Report.*

And this may suffice to shew the Necessity of our having some other Guide besides mere Human Wisdom. It is certain that before the Law dictated by God's Spirit prevail'd, Man never did know aright *God's good Pleasure*, and surely then it is but just to ascribe the Honour of this Improvement to him who gave us that Law.

But further, now this perfect Law is establish'd, Reason alone can no more enable us to perform a Right Course of Action than it could discover a Rule for it. The Proof of this Point will bring us to consider

A Second Class of Advocates for Human Ability, who tho' they do not carry Matters so far as the last, are still more absurd, and perhaps in reality more dangerous Enemies to true Religion, as they attack it under the Mask of Friendship. Their Tenets are an odd Composition, half Christian, half Infidel: Whilst they are *nam'd by the Name of Christ*, they are too wise in their own Conceit to receive his Doctrines, unless so model'd as to suit in every Respect with their Capacities and common Notions of Things. — These Men seem to allow nothing more to the Gospel than the Reputation of a Good System of Morality, and scarcely admit it's Divine Author into an higher Rank than that of a Preacher of Righteousness. They acknowledge indeed the Excellency of the Practical Duties enjoin'd by him, and profess themselves oblig'd to the Observance of them; but this they apprehend they can do of their own-selves without farther Assistance, because they cannot understand the Manner in which this Assistance is convey'd to them. It is a Maxim with them to believe nothing which they do not understand, and hence they think themselves at Liberty to refuse their Assent to such Truths as are in their own Nature incomprehensible to a finite Capacity; tho' they be as expressly

pressly reveal'd in Scripture, as the Precepts whose Authority they profess to acknowledge.

Now these Men will allow that we are rationally led to believe the Divine Authority of the Gospel from Signs and Miracles, the genuine Indications of the Finger of God : Is it not then manifestly absurd to withhold our Assent to any Thing therein expressly contain'd, merely because we do not understand the Manner of it, or because it is not suggested to us by Natural Reason ? This is putting our own Wisdom in Competition with that of the Most High. The only Question that can arise in the Case is, Whether the Doctrine be written ? If it be, to allow the Divine Authority of the Revelation, and yet to admit only of Part of it as true, is surely the strangest of all the Absurdities that ever the Pride of Man invented.

But not to enlarge on this Subject farther than the Matter in hand requires. — The Manner of the Operation of God's Spirit on the Heart of Man is a Mystery far above our Comprehension, but will it become us to ask for that Reason *how can these Things be ?* When God hath expressly told us that his Holy Spirit sanctifieth our Hearts, and perpetually assists us in the great Work of our Salvation, can any Man dare to doubt that such a Guide is actually with us, because the Manner of his Operation is not the Object of his Senses ? When the Inspir'd Apostle declares that *it is God that worketh in us to will and to do of his good Pleasure,* shall we endeavour to pervert the evident Sense of

of these plain Words, because we do not feel these Workings within us?

The Truth is, that tho' we do not know the precise Manner of the Spirit's dwelling in us, yet we are certain that the natural Light of Reason in us is not extinguish'd but assisted by him. He works not in us by any violent Force, but in a Way conformable to our natural Faculties: He directs and regulates those Powers that we have from Nature, by gentle Counsels and Convictions enabling us to use them in a Way agreeable to our own Duty and God's Glory, which it is certain we have not otherwise sufficient Strength to do.

For let us not vainly imagine that now the Way of Salvation and a perfect Rule for Life is made manifest, we can yet please God or walk conformably to his Will by our own Natural Abilities. It is our Duty to *work out our own Salvation with Fear and Trembling*; but it is the Grace of God that is in us that must make our Endeavours effectual. We are expressly taught, that *if we ^a have not the Spirit of Christ we are none of his*: That *^b in our Flesh dwelleth no good Thing*: *^c That our carnal Mind is Enmity against God*, that *it is not subject to the Law of God neither indeed can be*.

He that believeth these Things (I say) and many other Texts that might be cited to the same Purpose, will surely lay aside all Confidence in the *Flesh* which he knows *cannot please God*.

a Rom. 8. 9.

b Ibid. 7. 18.

c Ibid. 8. 7.

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But to go again to Fact. No Christian in these Times will think his own Abilities superiour to those of a favourite Disciple of our Lord, who had seen his mighty Works and heard his Doctrines from his own Mouth: And we find (notwithstanding all this) that in Time of severe Trial, it was not till ^a *the Lord turned and looked on Peter*, that *Peter remember'd the Words of the Lord*.

From this affecting Instance of Human Frailty let us learn not to be *high minded but fear*. In time of violent Temptation how shall we escape unless we have a faithful Monitor attending us, who may awaken us and set us on our Guard? This surely will induce us to receive with Thankfulness this truly comfortable Doctrine; that however weak our Flesh may be, we have the Spirit of God dwelling in us, who *is sufficient for us*, will help our Infirmities and enable us to stand secure and unmov'd in the evil Day of Temptation.

Indeed the Reason of the Thing speaks plainly the same Truth: For if Men be not more perfect now than formerly, they will become as deaf to the Voice of the Gospel as they were heretofore to that of Nature: The Scripture will become a dead Letter, (ineffectual as Reason was) unless the Spirit which God hath Sent quicken us to the Observance of it.

I might add, that though no *extraordinary* effects are now to be expected, yet we may perhaps at this Day see *visible* Marks of the Spirit, in the Conversion of harden'd and impenitent

Sinners by means otherwise unaccountable; and many good Men have found from happy experience that he filleth their Hearts with Joy and Peace, and that even *in the midst of Sorrows his Comforts refresh their Souls.*

It is true, Men are very liable to Mistakes in this Matter, and to ascribe to the Workings of the Spirit the Effects of an heated Imagination. It may be therefore proper to lay down briefly, as was propos'd in the *second* Place, one or two plain Rules, whereby we may distinguish whether it be really God's Spirit that worketh in us.

It will be in vain to reason with an Enthusiast who professes himself above Reason: And it will be to no Purpose to endeavour to prove to any Man that he hath not the Spirit, when he fancies he feels his Motions in Himself. Or, when the Mind has so long contemplated one favourite Point that it seems to hold the Rank of intuitive Knowledge, it is no easy Matter for Reason to dispossess it.

In these Cases there is little Room to hope, that a Man will be able to distinguish Whim from Truth, or Enthusiasm from Piety. The Rules therefore which I am going to lay down, are not intended for those, who are so far gone as to have almost lost common Sense; but to preserve others who are yet of a Sound Mind, and to perswade them not to be *carried away with every Wind of Doctrine*, not to take any Thing for the *Spirit*, before they have *try'd and examined it whether it be of God.*

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The Charms of Novelty, and a warm Fancy, have often drawn very sensible Men into Opinions, which Prejudice hath afterwards confirm'd them in, which common Sense, if it had been in time exerted, would not only have preserv'd them from, but have shewn to be truly ridiculous. It is remarkable too, that these Absurdities are commonly most frequent when the contrary Extreme is in Fashion.

When Human Reason is insolently set up in Opposition to Divine Truths, some People will be for discarding it entirely from the Question. When one set of Men exclaims against all Mysteries, another will be fond of nothing but Mystery. Both these are real Enemies to Truth, tho' the latter be undesignedly so. It will be as impossible to support Religion among Rational Creatures without Rational Argument, as it is impossible that Reason can do it's Duty without the Assistance of Grace. And tho' many of the Doctrines of Christianity are above Reason, and yet rationally the Objects of our Faith, it will be but an ill Compliment to a Religion calculated for the Use of all Mankind, to say that it is all mysterious. Besides it is manifestly contrary to Truth: For, whatever Mysteries wrong Interpreters may pretend to have discover'd in the clearest Passages of Scripture, it is certain that what we are to believe and practise, is there so clearly express'd, that *he that runneth may read and understand.*

Perhaps one good Rule for avoiding Errour might be; not to be too fond of prying into Mysteries, and taking Heed not to consider the Mysteriousness of any Doctrine, as a Mark of it's Divinity. Supernatural Evidence may, as we have observ'd, so far confirm any supernatural Doctrine as to make it very credible: But let it be carefully remember'd, that so much greater Evidence must be necessary to induce our Assent to any Truth, as that Truth is farther remov'd from our common Notions of Things. To maintain that any Thing is more credible, merely because it is less intelligible, is so monstrous that it cannot be worth while to refute it seriously: It would be almost an Affront to common Sense to have mention'd it, if we did not know that Men of Character have sometimes avow'd it; and it may be suspected to have done much Mischief in the World.

But to proceed.

When any new Sect of Men shall arise pretending to new Light, Reason and the Scripture will teach us *to know of their Doctrines, whether they be of God*: And we may fairly bring the Pretensions of any Sect to their proper Test, if we examine whether they are guided by true Piety, the Word of God, and Christian Charity.

There are many People, who mistake the Nature of true Piety; and it must be confess'd, that some Books of Devotion, which are often put into the Hands of young Persons, or the

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common People, have probably contributed not a little to this Errour: The exalted and passionate Strains, that are there to be met with, have made them conclude, that true Piety, such as may be necessary to Salvation, cannot be attain'd without Extasies and Transports of Devotion. It is impossible to conceive what Mischiefs this Notion hath given Rise to. Some weak Men finding themselves incapable of rising to that Height of Rapture which they have thought necessary, have sunk into Despair; whilst others have carried their ecstasick Flights and exalted Raptures so far, as to offend not only against Decency in their Expressions and Actions, but even against God Himself by horrid Blasphemy.

Common Sense when left to judge coolly will best distinguish between the extravagant Flights of the Devotee, and the calm but more solid Piety of the true Christian. And he will preserve himself from this Enthusiasm, who remembers that true Piety does not consist merely in our Addresses to God or the Manner we perform them in: It is in it's full Extent a godly Habit not confined to the Acts of Prayer and Thanksgiving, but shewing itself alike in the Performance of all other Duties enjoined by the Law of God; a good Life and edifying Conversation composing the principal Part of that reasonable Service which is acceptable to God. Let us remember that Devotion is not the more acceptable for being less discreet; that it may be very sincere

and solid tho' very calm and composed; very lively without Rapture; and very warm without Extravagance.

It must be owned that different Men have different Ways of expressing themselves in the same Circumstances. We are not therefore immediately to brand all passionate Warmth in Devotion, and much less the strictest Regularity of Life, with any odious Names. Charity ought certainly to incline us to think well of our Brother, and make us conclude a Reality of true Piety till we are convinced of his Insanity. And we shall be better able in general to judge in this Matter by the Help of plain common Sense, than by any particular Rules that can be laid down.

In the mean time one cannot but wish, that every serious and devout Christian would as much as possible avoid every Appearance of Affectation: He will by that means not only escape all Suspicion of Enthusiasm or Hypocrisy which he doth not deserve, but he may possibly save others from falling into Errour by mistaking his Example.

A second Test which we may properly bring any new Set of Men to, is their Conformity to the Scriptures. This is a Rule which all Protestants admit of, but Doubts have sometimes arisen as to the Manner of interpreting them. Reason assisted by human Learning must certainly here be our Guide: The Holy Scriptures must undoubtedly be read and understood in the

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Manner that other Writings are: Their literal and proper Sense must be ascertained by true Criticism, and a Knowledge of the original Languages in which they were written. An Enthusiast, overlooking the literal Sense, is usually too fond of an Allegorical or Typical one; mysterious Meanings are found out in single Words or even Letters; and by this means any Conceit however opposite to the Tenour of the whole Scripture, or to Common Sense, may be made out to be a Scripture Doctrine. Let Those (if such there be) who go about to interpret the holy Writings by any new Method consider well what they build thereon — Let them take care that they do not really obscure while they profess to illustrate that Law whose singular and distinguishing Character is Plainness and Simplicity — that they do not make the Sense more uncertain by establishing any Rule of Interpretation where Fancy is more concern'd than Reason; and which therefore may give Countenance to Errour or Folly. And lastly — that they do not fix on the Doctrines of Christ such Absurdities as may make them the Scoff of the Infidel and Blasphemer. Let Men say what they will, whatever is contrary to Common Sense Common Sense will reject. And it is the Glory of the Christian Religion that with Regard to the Excellence and Importance of it's Doctrines, it makes as open an Appeal to Reason as it doth with Regard to those external Signs which at first confirm'd it. The Wisdom of God is as evidently

vidently display'd in the Excellency of the Precepts, as his Power was in those Miracles whereby it was at first propagated. Christianity by this Means comes recommended to us by every Method of Persuasion; it's external and internal Evidence both alike concur to make one consistent Proof, forcible enough to silence all the Objections which the conceited Wisdom of the Philosopher, or the Ignorance of foolish Men may bring against it; and we may well conclude then, that every Interpretation which appears manifestly not to bring with it the *Spirit of a sound Mind* cannot be from the Spirit of God.

The third Test whereby we may know whether any Set of Men is guided by the Spirit of God, is their Attention to Christian Charity. This is a never-failing Rule; for it is by *this we are known to be Christ's Disciples*. Enthusiasts from a warm Zeal without Knowledge almost always fail in this Point: Bigotted to their own Opinions they scarcely ever allow any Kind of Merit, or indeed Possibility of Salvation to those who will not follow nor be led by them. I wish however this was so confin'd to Enthusiasts as to make it their peculiar and distinguishing Mark. But we every Day see Men the farthest remov'd from Enthusiasts (who are even engag'd in Controversy with them) betray such Acrimony, and *render such railing for railing* as is highly inconsistent with the Spirit of the Gospel.

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To defend Christianity or any Doctrine of it with Passion and uncharitable Warmth doth not only weaken the Argument, but is directly contrary to that *Love, Joy, and Peace*, which are the constant *Fruits of the Spirit of God*. Provoking or insulting Language is not the most likely Way of making those who are already too much inflam'd attend coolly to the *Words of Truth and Soberness*. Give me leave to observe farther; that Enthusiasts do by no means deserve such Treatment, whilst they are known to mean well, and to be unblameable in their Lives and Conversations: They are then rather to be pitied as weak Brethren; made weak perhaps by an honest tho' misguided Zeal for our Holy Religion, beset on every side by Enemies from without and betray'd as to her essential Doctrines by false Friends within. Perhaps this Advice of *Gamaliel* may generally hold good: *Let them alone, for if this Doctrine be of Men it will come to nought; if it be of God ye cannot overthrow it.*

However (as it is certain that an absurd Way of defending Christianity or it's Doctrines does it real Injury) let those who think it of Consequence to refute the Errours of our modern Enthusiasts, join to sound Argument such a Manner as may cool rather than inflame, may soothe rather than exasperate, may convince them of their Mistakes rather than confirm them in their Obstinacy.

After all we must remember that most Danger is to be apprehended from the other Extreme. ^a "Enthusiasm (says a late truly excellent Prelate) had it's Day; it's Effects "were violent but soon over; Infidelity infects "more quietly but spreads widely. The former "bred a Fever in the State, this breeds a Consumption and final Decay. A Rebellion or "Invasion alarms and puts the Publick on it's "Defence, but a Corruption of Principles works "it's Ruin more slowly (perhaps) but more "surely."

When we see these Corruptions daily gaining Ground, we must know that our principal Concern ought to be to defend our holy Religion from those Men, who under Pretence of asserting the Liberties and Privileges of human Reason, are audaciously trying to bring it again under the Bondage of Corruption from which the Gospel of Christ hath happily set it free.

May I farther observe, that when the *Love of many* to the Gospel seemeth to wax cold, it will be a proper Time for every real Christian to be very explicit in his Declaration for the Faith? Will it then become any Minister of the Gospel to preach mere Morality, instead of Christian Duties? This would have too much the Appearance of turning again to those *weak and beggarly Elements*, and preferring the Foolishness of Man to the Wisdom of God. It fa-

^a Late Lord Bishop of Cloyne, Min. Phil. Dial. 2. §. 23.

vours somewhat of being *ashamed of the Gospel*
of Christ, and has perhaps given Occasion to an
 evil Report which hath prevailed, that even the
 Christian Priesthood is not absolutely free from
 the general Corruption, and that the *Foes* of
 Christianity are most emphatically *Those of her*
own Household. That we may avoid *every* such
Appearance of evil; would it not be prudent,
 and would it not be a Matter of Charity too,
 (as Offence would be avoided) to confine our
 Discourses from the Pulpit to Scriptural Doc-
 trines? or at least to take care not to preach
 Morality without naming the Name of Christ?
 The practical Duties of Man will be more easi-
 ly apprehended by the Bulk of Mankind, and
 always much better enforced, when taken as a
 reveal'd Law of God; and though Deductions
 from Reason do well serve to illustrate and con-
 firm the Reasonableness of Scripture Doctrine,
 yet we know that taken separately from it,
 Reason is not *sufficient of itself to do any Thing*
as of itself; and whatever ingenious Truths a
 Writer may draw from Nature and the Fitness
 of Things, a Christian will acknowledge that *it*
is God who worketh in him to will and to do of his
good Pleasure.

F I N I S.



